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ABSTRACT

Questionnaires were completed by 131 married couples to determine the role of dispositional jealousy on marital success. The total jealousy in the marriage was found to be negatively related to several indices of marital success. Further analyses indicated that marital outcomes were negatively associated with the husband's perception of the wife's jealousy. Neither his own jealousy, the wife's jealousy, nor the wife's perception of the husband's jealousy were associated with the person's appraisal of the marriage. It was also found that husband's outcomes were associated with actual differences between husband and wife jealousy. Couples similar in jealousy were rated more positively by husbands than were dissimilar couples. There were no similar effects due to differences in jealousy for the wife's outcomes. (Author)

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The Role of Jealousy in Marriage[1]

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The Role of Jealousy in Marriage

Jealousy can be treated as either a response to various situational cues or as a dispositional characteristic of the person. In earlier research (Bringle, Roach, Andler, & Evenbeck, 1977) a scale was developed to measure how intensely a person reacts to a variety of jealousy provoking situations. The Self-Report Jealousy Scale, a measure of a person's propensity toward jealous reactions, was then administered with a number of personality scales. Acknowledging the limitations of a dispositional analysis of the emotion, it is interesting that a very consistent pattern of results was obtained. Highly jealous persons were found to be lower in self-concept and self-esteem, more dissatisfied with life, anxious, malevolent in their attitude toward the world, externally controlled, and dogmatic. Thus, the results indicate that there is utility in examining jealousy from a dispositional point of view.

The approach in the present research has been to examine how jealousy influences marital relationships. Given the earlier findings which indicated that jealousy is associated with some negatively valued personality characteristics, our hunch was that dispositional jealousy would be a disturbing and disruptive force in a marriage. It is important to note that we are not examining the expression or occurence of jealousy in marriage, but rather how jealous people succeed in marital relationships.

Method

The subjects were 131 couples between the ages of 20 and 40, married at least two years, and obtained from the student bodies of two large Midwestern universities. Subjects filled out questionnaires in which they completed the Self-Report Jealousy Scale for their spouse and themself, and questionnaires which obtained demographic information and attitudinal measures. These latter variables will be mentioned as the findings are discussed.

Results and Discussion

In order to investigate the impact of jealousy in general on the relationship, the first set of analyses utilized the sum of the husband and wife's score on the Self-Report Jealousy Scale as they had filled it out for themselves. This variable, then, expressed the quantity of dispositional jealousy in the relationship. A general characterization of the relationship was obtained by summing across nine semantic differential items which were found to constitute a unidimensional subscale. These included exciting, honest, valuable, cooperative, open, intimate, relaxed, secure, and committed. The total propensity toward intensely jealous reactions was found to have a significant, negative correlation with the couple's combined characterization of the relationship ($r = -.21$, $p < .05$). That is, as the total amount of jealousy increased, the descriptions were less positive.

Subjects were also asked to indicate on the same semantic differential scales how they thought their spouse would characterize

their relationship. The finding was similar. As jealousy increased, couples believed that the spouses would characterize the relationship in a less favorable fashion (r = -.20, p < .05).

One measure of marital happiness which has been suggested (Howard & Dawes, 1976) is the frequency of sexual intercourse minus the frequency of arguments over a specified period of time. Though we did not have these data available, we did include items assessing a subject's satisfaction with his/her sex life and the frequency of disruptive arguments. A difference score utilizing these two items was thus constructed. Again, this index of marital happiness had a significant negative correlation with the total jealousy in the relationship (r = -.26, p < .01). In addition, the frequency of disruptive arguments reported by the couples was positively correlated with total jealousy (r = .23, p < .01). Thus, the total jealousy in the relationship was consistently related to these several indices of marital success.

Included in the questionnaire was the item "How happy do you think you would be if you were not married to your present spouse (i.e., whatever alternative relationship or situation there might be)?" Acknowledging that CLalt is the lowest standard of outcomes acceptable before terminating a relationship (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), this item does bear some close correspondence to the CLalt. This item had a strong relationship to total jealousy such that highly jealous couples report that they would have poor outcomes outside the relationship (r = -.29, p < .01). Hence they are highly dependent upon the relationship.

Further analyses shed more light on the relationship between jealousy and these variables. In order to do these, it was necessary to construct a measure which represented the subject's perception of the amount of jealousy in the marriage. The variable was comprised of the subject's score on the Self-Report Jealousy Scale combined with the subject's prediction of the spouse's responses to the scale items. The correlation between the perceived jealousy and the subject's semantic differential scale ($r = -.25$, $p < .01$), semantic differential scale filled out for the spouse ($r = -.31$, $p < .01$), Marital Happiness index ($r = -.26$, $p < .01$), and frequency of disruptive arguments ($r = .26$, $p < .01$) were all significant for the husbands, but not for the wives (-.08, -.15, -.18, respectively) with the exception of frequency of disruptive arguments. The frequency of disruptive arguments did have a positive correlation with the wife's perception of jealousy ($r = .23$, $p < .01$).

Median splits were made on the Self-Report Jealousy scores and the predicted spouse's scores to allow them to be treated as independent variables in analyses of variance on the four indices of marital happiness. In all cases, the husband's report of the marriage was dependent solely upon his estimate of his wife's jealousy. His own jealousy did not produce any significant effects nor were the wife's outcomes associated with either her jealousy or her perception of the husband's jealousy.

It was expected from earlier research that when a relationship involves two people who have a tendency to react in a highly jealous manner, the marriage would be less desirable. However, it is not clear that this is caused by jealousy *per se*, and this was not the intent of the study. The finding that males and females differ in this regard was not anticipated. It is interesting to speculate as to the source of the finding that only husbands' outcomes are associated with their perception of their wife's jealousy.

In previous research we had not found sex differences on the intensity of jealous reactions. However, in this sample, females report more intensely jealous reactions than males ($F = 5.1$, $p < .03$). If one does assume that jealousy has a disruptive influence on the relationship, then the fact that males report more negative characterizations as a function of their perception of wife jealousy may be the result of the general higher level of female jealousy. However, it may just be an accident of the sample that the higher level was found in females. If this is true, then differences in jealousy between partners of the dyad, disregarding sex, would be important.

In order to examine this possibility, median splits were made on the Self-Report Jealousy scores of husbands and wives, and these were treated as independent variables in analyses of variance. For husbands, significant interactions were obtained on his semantic differential scale ($F = 9.39$, $p < .003$), his prediction of his wife's responses to the semantic differential scale ($F = 6.67$, $p < .01$), and

his Marital Happiness score (sexual satisfaction minus frequency of disruptive arguments; $F = 4.92$, $p < .03$). In addition, three other items which had not previously produced significant results on total jealousy showed significant interactions. They were, "How satisfying to you is your sex life with your spouse?" ($F = 5.48$, $p < .02$), "How satisfied are you now?" ($F = 10.23$, $p < .02$), and "Compared to other marriages, how would you rate your marriage?" ($F = 7.25$, $p < .01$).[2] All of these interactions indicate that for both high and low jealous husbands the ratings were less positive when wives were dissimilar to them with regard to the propensity toward jealous reactions than when they were similar. That is, husbands scoring low on the Self-Report Jealousy Scale tended to produce more favorable ratings when they had wives who also scored low than when they had wives who scored high. Also, jealous husbands gave more favorable reports when their wives were also jealous than not.

This represents a reversal in the pattern of results for perceived jealousy for the highly jealous husband. That is, when the perceived jealousy of the wife is considered, highly jealous husbands report higher outcomes when their wife is low on perceived jealousy. But similarity is important when one examines the actual wife's jealousy and highly jealous husbands have higher outcomes when their spouse is similar. The pattern is consistent between sets of analyses for husbands low on jealousy. Higher outcomes are associated with similar wives.

From among this group, the only variable from the wife's questionnaire which produced a significant interaction was her indication as to how her husband would characterize the marriage on the semantic differential ($F = 3.99$, $p < .05$). Evidently, this was an appropriate description of him! Thus, it does not appear to be the sample's elevated female jealousy that resulted in husbands' outcomes being associated with their perception of female jealousy. Apparently, husbands are sensitive to their wives' jealousy, particularly when it is different from their own level.

Summary

What started out as a simple study to demonstrate that jealous married people would have less successful relationships, and which was shown in a consistent pattern of results, has now presented some rather complex issues. In summary, the total intensity of dispositional jealousy was found to be associated with the couple's attitudes toward the marriage, perceptions of the spouse's attitudes, Marital Happiness, and the frequency of arguments. When considering perceived jealousy, the husband's outcomes were a function of his perception of his wife's jealousy. However, the wife's outcomes were not associated with her jealousy nor her perception of the husband's jealousy. With the exception of frequency of arguments, differences in jealousy between the members of the marriage were found to be associated with these variables and sexual satisfaction, marital satisfaction, and how they rate the marriage only for husbands.

The finding that the husband's general attitudes are associated with perceived or actual jealousy, while the wife's attitudes are not a function of either, is intriguing, as is the reversal in pattern for highly jealous husbands. Unfortunately, the design of the study allowed us only to identify the phenomenon. The dynamics of it, as well as those which would explain why the relationships exist between dispositional jealousy and indices of marital success, present interesting issues to be explored.

It is also important that actual differences in jealousy were associated with a larger, though overlapping, set of variables measuring characteristics of the marriage for husbands. This suggests that dissimilarity may be a more important determinant of marital success than the total perceived level of jealousy in the marriage.

It was never our assumption that marital outcomes were determined solely by dispositional jealousy. Intimate human interactions are much too complex to be reduced in such a manner. However, to find that the husband's marital attitudes are related to jealousy, while the wife's attitudes are dependent upon other factors is important both to the study of jealousy and marital relations. The issue of why these relationships exist and the role of mediating variables, such as communication and reaction patterns, deserve attention.

Footnotes

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[2]Responses to these items were made on 9-point graphic rating scales anchored for the first two by "unsatisfying" to "satisfying" and, for the last, by "poor" to "excellent".

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